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THE EXPEDITION TO BIRTING'S LAND

AND OTHER BALLADS

BY
GEORGE BORROW

LONDON

PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION

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THE EXPEDITION TO BIRTING'S LAND

THE King he o'er the castle rules,
He rules o'er all the land ;
O'er many a hardy hero too,
With naked sword in hand.

Let the courtier govern his steed,
The boor his thatched cot,
But Denmark's King o'er castles rules,
For nobler is his lot.

King Diderik sits on Brattingsborg,
And round he looks with pride :
“ No one I know of in the world
Would me in fight abide.”

Then answered Brand Sir Viferlin,
Had been in many a land :
“Methinks I know a warrior stout
Would thee in fight withstand.

“He's Ifald call'd, a king is he,
In Birting's land afar ;
And he has fellows following him
With savage wolves who war.

“O he has fellows following him
'Gainst teeth of bears who fight ;
The food in which he most delights
Is flesh of Christian wight.

“Every day in the East that dawns
His mouth he's wont to cool
With serpents, toads, and other filth,
That come from the hellish pool.”

As Ifald sat on his throne that day
He thus was heard to cry :
“Let some one bid my little foot page
To come, to me instantly.

“ Now list to me, thou little foot page,
On my errand thee I'll send
Unto the King of Brattingsborg,
To whom I am no friend.

“ Tell him that he must tribute pay,
Or for bloody war prepare ;
Forsooth if him in the field I meet
I him will little spare.”

Then answered straight the little foot page
And a gallant answer he gave :
“ My Lord thy message I'll carry forth,
Though they lay me in my grave.”

In came he, the little foot page,
And stood before the board :
“ Now list to me, King Diderik,
My master has sent you word.

“ Either tribute thou shalt pay,
As thou didst last year agree,
Or thou shalt meet us in the field,
And bloodshed there shall be.”

“I will not tribute pay, forsooth,
I scorn to stoop so low ;
Nay, rather unto Birting's land
With sword unsheathed I go.”

Then answer'd Vitting Helfredson,
And loud he laughed with glee :
“If ye fare this year into Birting's land
I too of the troop shall be.

“Last year wast thou in Birting's land,
And there didst lose thy steed ;
Thou hadst better stay in Brattingsborg
Than again seek Birting's mead.”

“On me, if I stay in Brattingsborg,
Be every malison ;
If I have no horse on which to ride
I have legs on which to run.”

There rode out from Brattingsborg
So many a knight renown'd ;
The rocks were split 'neath the coursers' feet,
And quaked the startled ground.

There rode forth King Diderik,
The lion upon his shield ;
And there too glittered the golden crown
So far across the field.

There rode Vidrik Verlandson,
The hammer and tongs he bore ;
And there rode good King Esmer's sons,
All men of wondrous power.

There rode the rich Count Rodengard,
A warrior stout and fine ;
And there rode King Sir Sigfred, who
Displayed a monarch's sign.

Then followed Siward Snarenswayne,
With many arrows white ;
And then came Brand Sir Viferlin,
Who never fled from fight.

And next rode Hero Hogen,
He looked a rose so brave ;
And then rode Folker Spillemand,
In his hand a naked glaive.

Then rode the bold young Ulf Van Yern,
A glorious horse upon ;
Behind him young Sir Humble rode,
And then Sir Sigfredson.

And then rode Gunther and Gernot,
With arrow on bended bow ;
And there rode Sonne Tolkerson,
With courage upon his brow.

There rode the little Grimmer,
In golden acton dight ;
And there rode Seyer the active,
Who yields to none in might.

And then came master Hildebrand,
As though to his courser fixt ;
The stalwart friar Alsing rode
The ancient hero next.

There rode Orm the Ungarswayne,
So bold of heart was he ;
So joyous were they every one,
And sure of victory.

Out galloped they all from Brattingsborg,
As fast as they could speed ;
But Vitting bold came running behind,
Because he had no steed.

It was hardy Angelfyr,
To Grimselin he cried :
“ O, he must on his bare legs run
Who has no horse to ride ! ”

And still ran Vitting, and still ran he,
Till with wrath he nigh was wode ;
Then he struck a warrior from his horse
And sat himself on, and rode.

It was Sir King Diderik,
He back a glance did throw :
“ O yonder I see the courtier ride
Who on foot was wont to go.

“ Here thou, Vitting Helfredson,
Thou art a warrior bold ;
Thou shalt hie forward to Birting's land,
And demand the tribute gold.

“With thee shall Vidrik Verlandson,
And Diderik knight of Bern ;
Of all my troop they are best at blows,
And most for battle yearn.”

They set themselves upon their steeds,
And away they rode like wind ;
The knights they roared, and their steeds they
gored,
For wroth were they in mind.

The watchman stood on the battlement
From whence he far could see :

“Yonder I warriors three espy
Who wrathful seem to be.

“The one is Vitting Helfredson
Who lost his steed last year ;
That a rugged guest he’ll prove to us
We have full cause to fear.

“The second is Vidrik Verlandson,
As the tongs and hammer shew ;
The third is Diderik Van Bern,
All warriors good, I trow.”

They left their steeds in the castle yard,
To the castle strode they in ;
Then might each man by their faces see
A fray would soon begin.

Upon the porter they laid their hands,
And him to pieces hew'd ;
Then in they strode to the high, high hall,
And before the King they stood.

Then up rose Ifald the King in rage,
And thus the King did cry :
“ O, whence are come the ill-starr'd loons
Before my board I spy ? ”

Then answered the skinker of the King,
Who skinkèd wine and mead :
“ Our sharp spears, if we ply them well,
Will drive them out with speed.”

It was Vitting Helfredson,
By the beard the skinker has ta'en ;
He smote him a blow the ear below,
Which dashed out half his brain.

He flung the dead corse on the board,
And a merry jest had he :
“ Who'll taste,” said Vitting Helfredson,
“ This precious roast for me ? ”

Then forth stepped Diderik Van Bern,
And, brandishing his glaive,
He hewed upon King Ifald's head,
And him to the navel clave.

And forth stepped Vidrik Verlandson,
And round began to hew ;
Heads and arms were smitten off
As round and round he flew.

In came King Ifald's mother grey,
With an eldritch scream she came ;
I tell to ye in verity
There ensued a wondrous game.

Vitting struck her with his sword,
A very fearful stroke ;
But she kissed asunder the good sword,
Into pieces three it broke.

With a single kiss of the witch's mouth
Was shivered the trusty sword ;
Vitting the hag by the weazand seized,
Without a single word.

The beldame changed herself to a crane,
And flew to the clouds on high ;
But Vitting donned a feather robe,
And pursued her through the sky.

They flew for a day, they flew for three,
Bold Vitting and the crane ;
Then Vitting seized the crane by the legs,
And her body rent in twain.

Homeward now, with sword in hand,
The valiant comrades wended :
All the Birting kemps are dead,
And the adventure ended.

THE SINGING MARINER

A Ballad from the Spanish

WHO will ever have again,
On the land or on the main,
Such a chance as happen'd to
Count Arnaldos long ago.

With his falcon in his hand,
Forth he went along the strand ;
There he saw a galley gay,
Briskly bearing for the bay.

Ask me not her name and trade,—
All the sails of silk were made ;
He who steer'd the ship along
Raised his voice, and sang a song.

Sang a song whose magic force
Calm'd the breaker in its course ;
While the fishes, sore amazed,
Left their holes and upward gazed.

And the fowl came flocking fast,
Round the summit of the mast ;
Still he sang to wind and wave :
“ God preserve my vessel brave !

“ Guard her from the rocks that grow
'Mid the sullen deep below ;
From the gust, and from the breeze,
Sweeping through Gibtarek's seas.

“ From the gulf of Venice too,
With its shoals and waters blue ;
Where the mermaid chants her hymn,
Borne upon the billow's brim.”

Forward stept Arnaldos bold,
Thus he spake, as I am told :
“ Teach me, sailor, I entreat,
Yonder song that sounds so sweet.”

But the sailor shook his head,
Shook it thrice, and briefly said :
“ Never will I teach the strain
But to him who ploughs the main.”

YOUTH'S SONG IN SPRING

O, SCARCELY is Spring a time of pure bliss,
He is wrong who full trust thereon layeth ;
From many it may
Take sorrow away,
But to many it trouble conveyeth.

O, when every thing is as joyous in Spring,
As in heaven, that never is dreary ;
'Tis a grievous case
If one mournful must pace,
And cannot be also merry !

THE NIGHTINGALE

Translated from the Danish

IN midnight's calm hour the Nightingale sings

Of freedom, of love, and delight ;

Come, haste to the grove where melody rings,

'Tis Philomel's notes that invite.

A fowler attentively follows her there,

Resolv'd for his victim to spread out a snare :

*Think, girls, of the Nightingale's fate, and
beware !*

In ambush his nets he carefully brings,

Glad innocence feels no alarm ;

Unguarded her flight—'midst danger she
wings—

And falls into sorrowful harm.

Alas ! she is silent, and full of despair,
He glides away quick with his treasure so rare :
*Think, girls, of the Nightingale's fate, and
beware !*

A beautiful cage adorns his fair prize,
In hope that for him she will sing ;
But Freedom, that wafted her notes to the skies,
Bore Gladness away on its wing.
Thus you, Philomela, resemble the fair,
And we, we delight in the love that we share :
O, think of the Nightingale's fate, and beware !

LINES

SAY from what mine took Love the yellow gold
To form those tresses ? from what thorn-bush
tore
Those roses sleek ? and from what summit
bore
That stainless snow which seems no longer cold ?

MORNING SONG

Nu rinder Solen op

FROM Eastern quarters now

The sun's up-wandering,
His rays on the rock's brow
And hill's side squandering.

Be glad, my soul ! and sing amidst thy pleasure,
Fly from the house of dust,
Up with thy thanks, and trust
To heaven's azure !

O, countless as the grains
Of sand so tiny,
Measureless as the main's
Deep waters briny,
God's mercy is, which He upon me showereth.
Each morning in my shell,
A grace immeasurable
To me down-poureth.

Thou best dost understand,
Lord God! my needing;
And placed is in Thy hand
My fortune's speeding,
And Thou foresee'st what is for me most fitting.
Be still, then, O my soul!
To manage in the whole
Thy God permitting.

May fruit the land array,
And corn for eating!
May truth e'er make its way,
With justice meeting!
Give thou to me my share with every other,
'Till down my staff I lay,
And from this world away
Wend to another!

FROM THE FRENCH

THIS world by fools is occupied,
And whom the sight of a fool displeases,
Within his chamber himself should hide,
And break his looking-glass to pieces.

THE MORNING WALK

To the beech grove with so sweet an air

It beckon'd me.

O, Earth ! that never the cruel plough-share

Had furrow'd thee !

In their dark shelter the flowerets grew,

Bright to the eye,

And smil'd by my foot on the cloudlets blue,

Which deck'd the sky.

To the wood through a field I took my way ;

There I could see

On the field an uppil'd stone-heap lay,

'Twixt hillocks three ;

So anciently grayly white it stood,
 An oblong ring :
Here doubtless was held in the old time good
 A royal Ting.

The royal stone, which there doth stand,
 The Stol-king press'd,
With crown on head, and sceptre in hand,
 In sables drest.
And every warrior solemnly pac'd
 Peaceful in thought,
And down on his stone himself calmly plac'd—
 No sword he brought.

The king's house stood on yonder height,
 With walls of power ;
On yon had his daughter, the damsel bright,
 Her maiden bower.
Upon the third the temple stood,
 Through the North famed wide,
Where to Thor was offered the he-goat's blood,
 In reeking tide.

O, lovely field ! and forest fair,
And meads grass-clad ;
Her bride-bed Freya every where
Enamelled had.
The corn-flowers rose in azure band
From earthly cell ;
Nought else could I do but stop and stand,
And greet them well.

Welcome on earth's green breast again,
Ye flowerets dear !
In spring how charming 'mid the grain
Your heads ye rear.
Like stars 'midst lightning's yellow ray
Ye shine red, blue :
O, how your summer aspect gay
Delights my view.

O poet ! poet ! silence keep,
God help thy case :
Our owner holds us sadly cheap,
And scorns our race.

Each time he sees, he calls us scum,
Or worthless tares ;
Hell-weeds that but to vex him come
'Midst his corn-ears.

The greatest grace done for our sake
In all his life,
Is from his pocket deep to take
His huge clasp knife ;
And heavy handful then to cut,
'Midst grumbling much—
Us with tobacco leaves to put
In seal-skin pouch.

He says, he says, that smoked this way,
We dross of the field,
To the world by chance, by poor chance, may
Some benefit yield ;
But as for our beauty, our blue and red hues,
'Tis folly indeed—
The mouth is his only test of use,
And that's his creed.

O wretched mortals !—O wretched man !
O wretched crowd !—
No pleasures ye pluck—no pleasures ye plan
In life's lone road :—
Whose eyes are blind to the glories great
Of the works of God ;
And dream that the mouth is the nearest gate
To joy's abode.

Come flowers ! for we to each other belong,
Come graceful elf,
And around my lute in sympathy strong
Now wind thyself ;
And quake as if mov'd by zephyr's wing,
'Neath the clang of the chord,
And a morning song with glee we'll sing
To our Maker and Lord !

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